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CHEAP LABOR IN A WORLD OF PRECIOUS WORDS:

What Do Writing Classes Produce?

Leo Parascondola

Economic inequality is the primary problem needing change to build community foundations for school achievement.

Merging the study of formal technique with social critique is not simple...but this project is no more and no less "political" than any other kind of literacy program. The claim of critical literacy is that no pedagogy is neutral, no learning process is value-free, no curriculum avoids ideology and power relations. —Ira Shor, "What Is Critical Literacy?" in *Critical Literacy in Action: Writing Words, Changing Worlds*

LP: Ira, in "What Is Critical Literacy?" you write, "Because critical writing classes propose social and personal alternatives to the status quo, the stakes are high. Why else would so much controlling regulation and administration be directed at writing and reading practices in school and society?" (16). A guiding theme of this volume is to examine the managerial logic that has come to dominate the discourse of Composition. Your suggested title for this interview sets the production and interpretation of texts in college writing instruction inside the historical context of dependence on cheap labor in higher education. If curriculum cannot avoid power relations, then that curriculum is inevitably linked to processes by which Composition is administered and rationalized. That is, we presume a relation between the working conditions of Composition and the product of the process – what writing classes produce. Can you say something about this relation between cheap labor and precious words?

IS: Yes. The most compelling issue in Composition has been its labor policy. The vast enterprise of first-year comp and basic writing depends on cheap labor to make it work. *An army of underpaid, overworked writing instructors (largely female) marks our field's continuing shame.* This exploitation of overeducated and undercompensated writing teachers has been underway since the field emerged in the 1880s, as the late Bob Connors told us. Recently, Donna Strickland has extended the research of Connors, Susan Miller, Eileen Schell, and others about the gendered connection of cheap labor to mechanical correctness and female staffing. So, to begin, we need to ask: What ethical position can Composition claim when it rests upon the abuse of poorly-paid, largely female staffs to carry the burden of imposing correct usage on first-year writers? Until we end the low wages, gender imbalance, micromanagement, and large classes in our field, Composition as a profession will remain unethical, sexist, and elitist, despite the progressive vectoring of our theories and innovations. Without a doubt, in the past thirty years, Composition has been blessed by luminaries and pioneers who have opened up critical options to traditional instruction. I love the social intelligence and imaginative moves in our journals and at our conferences. I admire the smart inventiveness, which marks many of our emerging practices. Yet, all this remarkable activity rests on a

mountain of cheap labor, where too many women teachers are paid too little for too much work in classes structured against the language and interests of working students and those of color.

Even though individual comp teachers don't count for much in the current set-up, the effects of their cheap labor are very consequential. The truth is that this culture could not live without its English teachers. Composition's cheap labor deals in precious words that generate student consciousness, on the one hand, and cash surpluses, on the other. From social and fiscal points of view, the underpaid efforts of writing teachers are actually priceless. The precious nature of Composition thus derives jointly from the enormous consequences of literacy in society (forming student thought, fitting students into the way things are) and the cash-cow status of college comp classes which cost less to run than the tuition they generate, thus producing surplus profits diverted to other institutional purposes.

Writing classes are one influential site in the formation of student consciousness. They accomplish this through pedagogical discourses structured as curricula and deployed through syllabi (exercises, assignments, texts, tests, etc.). Discourses in general are material forces for the social construction of humans and their world. Discourses are social interactions that develop us into the people we become. By participating in various discourses throughout our lives, we learn how to relate to the world and how to act in building that world and our lives in it. For many years, we are subjected to the pedagogical discourses of mass education whose explicit intention is to develop students into workers and citizens. Inside these discourses, we speak, write, and read in activities that teach us norms for acting and speaking. This socialization through pedagogical discourse is regulated in all societies. In our society, the official surveillance of literate practices (testing) in education has been intensifying since the protest era of the 1960s. No school subject matters are required longer and tested more than writing and reading. *For writing and reading to be so intensely regulated at every level of education suggests how precious these cultural practices are to the status quo.*

The precious role of literacy in socially constructing individuals helps to explain the micromanagement of reading and writing practices in schools and colleges. Of course, besides mass education, there is another area of society where literate practices are also micromanaged and censored--the mass media – offering more evidence that cultural practices creating consciousness are of crucial concern to groups dominating the status quo. Writing and reading, in sum, are closely watched because they contribute so heavily to the formation of human beings who will grow into people who can either confirm or question the status quo.

LP: Ira, Composition's systemic dependence on cheap labor has also been characterized within the field as a contradiction between historical narratives of professional self-management and more recent incursions by administrators deploying a "bottom line" managerial logic. More recently, Composition has become enmeshed in the politics of "accountability" in education. How do you see this complicated history?

IS: First-year college writing has always served as a gate to higher education, as a weeding-out, sorting-out process that favors white, affluent students. The freshman year has been a barrier through which students had to pass, contributing to the high drop-out rates that have characterized American higher education throughout its history. Burton Clark's famous essay "The Cooling-Out Function in Higher Education" was a 1950s examination of "structured failure" through writing courses and placement tests that eased non-elite students out of college back then. In the 1950s, the drop-outs were largely white in a pre-Open Access era. This was also the height of the Red Scare and the Cold War, so the high college drop-out rate was perceived by some policy princes such as James Bryant Conant as dysfunctional to producing skilled labor, in a time when many engineers were being churned out by the former Soviet universities. We could say that a Cold War manpower crisis existed then, which was managed out of existence by a vast expansion of American higher education from the '50s to the early '70s. This official venture then produced its own contradictions, like historically large public sector budgets, a new mass sense of social entitlement to higher learning, dissident student movements, and a dangerous oversupply of college-trained labor where there had been a dangerous shortage just a few years before.

A flood of baby-boomers filled first-year writing courses through the 1970s, creating a management problem on campus and a job-market crisis off campus. If the problem of the '50s was too few college graduates available for the expanding Cold War economy, the problem of the '70s and '80s became too many college grads overwhelming a contracting job market unable to employ them. On campus and in English Departments, the flood of first-year students was managed by evolving massive writing programs with empires of testing, placement, remediation, and comp. This vast expansion required staffing, budgeting, and surveillance. But, how do you implement and oversee a vast empire on the small budgets traditionally allotted to first-year writing? Managing the sudden demand for academic labor to teach first-year writing became as difficult as managing the growing demand by students for access to higher education. Layers of management expanded to police the operation with batteries of placement and entry exams, writing supervisors, coordinators, and administrators. The open door of the '60s was closed in the '70s, and tuition was raised, two certain mechanisms to control enrollments. The aggressive move towards greater use of cheap-labor adjuncts was another budget and management control that fit the history of Composition in the university. This management option for adjuncts was more extreme at community colleges where teachers and students have always been treated as lesser than those at four-year schools. Thus, the absorption of the baby-boom into college and the attendant expansion of higher education faculties posed a cost and management crisis that was solved by raising gates to enrollment through increased tuition and increased testing, and by increasing the use of underpaid, overworked (female) adjuncts.

For example, in the early 1970s at a place like the City University of New York, a huge number of non-traditional first-year students arrived in our writing classes, compelling the immediate hiring of new staff to teach them and the renting of space to house the sudden growth in writing classes. At that moment at least, the new hires were largely full-time, tenure-track positions, which gave the new faculty an institutional stake, a professional voice, and an indexed fiscal claim in college affairs. The large numbers of new faculty and new students portended rising cultural democracy and financial costs from below until managerial campaigns seized control of the situation by 1978, with batteries of bogus entry tests, newly imposed tuition, and adjunct hires replacing full-time firings. Replacing high-wage, institutionally situated full-timers with low-wage, institutionally marginal part-timers was mediated by the declaration of a fake fiscal crisis in New York in the 1970s (at the same time there was a fake national oil shortage as well as a fake national literacy crisis, demonstrating once again how much political power depends on the power to control discourse). By the 1980s, the managerial counter-revolution against Open Admissions and against the labor power of full-time faculty was more or less complete, with the part-time instructors being the most vulnerable, lowest paid, and most controllable form of labor. The "accountability" of labor to management was secured by this undermining of full-time positions. The "accountability" of students to management was secured by ever more aggressive testing regimes.

LP: Within the CUNY system, and certainly nationally as well, we have seen long-standing dependence upon assorted standardized instruments for a variety of management purposes. In CUNY's history, we've had the Freshman Skills Assessment Test (with the keystone being the Writing Assessment Test or WAT). Currently, we have the new ACT – for both admission and placement – and the "rising junior" Proficiency Exam, a certification exam. In addition to this, many departments have exit exams from the Composition sequence. All these developments have their national reflections. What effects are increasing dependence on standardized testing and standardized curricula having on pedagogy? What kind of limits does the standardization trend present to pedagogy?

IS: Apparently, about 97% of Composition programs use fill-in-the-blank placement tests or the so-called "timed impromptu" essay, a fifty-minute, agree-or-disagree exam that the CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test had been modeled on. About 3% or so use portfolio assessments that depart from these other two means. We cannot accurately measure students' writing competence by a fill-in-the-blank exam because that doesn't test writing. Nor can we accurately measure writing competence by sitting students in an artificial setting and commanding them to write for fifty minutes on a topic for which they've had no

preparation, aren't allowed to do research, can't do consultation, can't do peer review or peer editing, and aren't given a chance to write successive drafts. *What we've learned in the past three decades about effective writing instruction is violated by the fifty-minute timed impromptu that's as popular as the short answer exam. These two have produced enormous failure and are bogus testing instruments.* What they do create is cheap top-down management control of writing programs, that is, control of labor and of costs. Low-cost bogus testing fits into low-cost staffing, so that the cheapest teachers do most of the work while students pay full tuition for the writing class, thus producing the cash-cow comp surplus I mentioned above.

Fill-in-the-blank testing and the timed impromptu are the cheapest ways to produce one-shot numbers measuring student illiteracy that justify positioning the students as cultural deficits, which in turn justifies the existence of an enormous writing program with an army of poorly paid writing instructors. It's modeled on authoritarian rhetoric and writing practices that lead to first-year writing courses as a revolving door or cash cow that generates extra revenues siphoned off to support elite upper-division courses and costly desk-potato administrators.

LP: I want to return to the issue of what might be the ends of student writing where Composition is dominated by a management discourse, but, first, I'd like to follow up on what you said earlier about Composition's historical dependence on cheap labor and the implications for pedagogy. That is, how do you conceive of the limitations on writing instruction when well over half of all Composition instructors have to hustle to make a living, teaching as many as five, six, seven sections (sometimes more) at multiple campuses? What kinds of things are possible and impossible in the writing classroom?

IS: *First of all, we have to ask what right do we have to employ teachers or to enroll students in such dreadful conditions?* Having Comp built from cheap labor, bogus testing, and rote instruction, we should be amazed if students learn to write and if teachers are able to teach. Classes are too large; the teaching loads of part-timers are often too heavy because earning a living course by course compels many to take on more than is healthy for them or their students. They're not given the office space, or benefits deserved by professionals. So, how can we have high expectations from their work? Students need a lot of individual attention to propel their development. Elite schools and colleges offer small classes as an upper-deck luxury. Some students and teachers in our society are allowed optimum conditions for learning, but not most. Writing teachers especially need time to assign and respond to a lot of student writing, to work with students tutorially and in writing groups. Large classes and heavy course loads mean worn-down teachers who have to rush from room to room and paper to paper. It means less time and attention to experiment with the new pedagogies in our field (like shared authority, ethnography, service learning, and community literacy projects). Cheap labor and cash-cow status for Composition classes tilt practice towards factory-model instruction – workbook teaching and mass testing. Cheap labor and micromanagement from above support the status quo because they pull us in the direction where most teachers and students meet in conditions too restrictive for deploying critical, student-centered, feminist, and multicultural pedagogies.

What we need and what I have proposed is a democratic labor policy for writing instruction. This labor policy would affirm that all teaching jobs in writing programs are full-time, tenure-track faculty positions. Any instructors can split one of these full-time positions at their own choice if they choose to teach less than a full-time load. If any teachers want to go half-time for whatever reasons, they will get half of a full-time salary, plus full benefits. This labor policy means that we have only full-time jobs in the field. If two instructors want to split a full line because they're raising children, or have to finish dissertations or a novel, or whatever, it's their choice, not one compelled by the administration. Self-management from below instead of micromanagement from above will end the cash-cow condition of Composition in the university and guarantee that the tuition revenues generated by writing programs are invested in the students and teachers in the writing classes, not siphoned off to support luxurious grad seminars, upper-division majors courses, special events, or the perks of administrators. The next step in a democratic labor

policy for self-management would be for writing staffs themselves to elect their own writing supervisors.

Again, for all those who think this labor policy too costly, I repeat that the money is already there. *We have to remember that first-year writing programs, both Composition and Basic Writing, are cash cows that produce budget surpluses for the universities.* Those surpluses are extracted in a colonial manner from the programs and transferred to the college budget managed by the administration. So, essentially, there's a fiscal drain out of the cash cow of first-year writing, creating impoverishment in writing programs in the way "poor" or "underdeveloped" nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America are impoverished, when in fact these territories have yielded fantastic wealth transferred to Europe and the United States. The wealth has always been there – just the wrong people have control of it. On each campus, we need to research how much surplus revenue is generated by first-year courses and then insist that that money stay in the writing program to finance small classes for students and full-time jobs for all instructors. Without such a labor policy insisting all positions be full-time, we have no right to make the extravagant demands for professional service from adjunct instructors now paid so little.

LP: Ira, in light of those comments about a labor policy, I wanted to ask you about what is increasingly becoming a common trend in higher education, especially in Composition. As an alternative to maintaining a sufficient number of full-time, tenure-track faculty lines, many universities and colleges are offering, instead, non-tenurable renewable multi-year contracts for full-time instructors and lecturers. How does this phenomenon fit into your conception of a labor policy?

IS: I've noticed offers of non-tenurable full-time jobs with loads of 4/4 or 5/5 plus health benefits. These non-tenure jobs will create a permanent underclass of marginal writing faculty with crushing workloads that will limit their professional growth. They will not be allowed to teach other courses and develop their curricular repertoire; they will be hampered in finishing doctorates, attending conferences, studying books and journals. Such non-tenured faculty will, inevitably, be looked down upon by tenure-track professors in the status-conscious world of academia. This is a management ploy of divide-and-conquer – this time the super-exploited full-timers versus tenured faculty. Writing instruction will still be targeted as a special area of exploitation. This is a dangerous and unhealthy direction to go. Instead, we should organize to convert all part-time jobs to full-time tenure lines.

LP: Changing pace a bit, I'd like to refer readers back to the title for the interview, "Cheap Labor in a World of Precious Words: What Do Writing Classes Produce?" Up to now, we've been focusing on only one aspect of cultural production in higher education – *cheap labor*. I'd like to ask you now about the results of that process – *precious words*. The historians of Rhetoric and Composition – from Albert Kitzhaber to Wallace Douglas, Donald Stewart, Richard Ohmann, Winifred Horner, Robert Connors, James Berlin, Sharon Crowley, David R. Russell, Nan Johnson, and Maureen Daly Goggin – nearly all refer to a relationship between the development of Composition and the literacy requirements of the burgeoning professional and managerial classes born and expanding very rapidly in the final quarter of the nineteenth century. What many of us in the field see, then, is a historical and structural responsibility on the part of college writing programs (and English, generally) to produce a new kind of rhetoric, one radically different from the oral rhetoric of traditional elite colleges of the nineteenth century, one more appropriate to the kind of writing necessary to managing a large and growing industrial economy – what Connors called a "composition-rhetoric." That responsibility remains in place to the present day. That is, there is a certain kind of literacy required as the end product of Composition, just as there is a certain kind of sensibility required as the end product of Composition (Miller).

In your introductory essay to *Critical Literacy in Action* to which I referred earlier, you cite scholars such as John Rouse, James Berlin, and Richard Ohmann – folks whose work we've talked about for years – about the creation of this kind of literacy and the creation of a specific kind of sensibility. John Rouse's 1979 essay, "The Politics of Composition," poses a compelling question for Composition:

(L)anguage learning is the process by which a child comes to acquire a specific social identity. What kind of person should we bring into being? [E]very vested interest in the community is concerned with what is to happen during those years, with how language training is to be organized and evaluated, for the continued survival of any power structure requires the production of certain personality types. The making of an English program becomes, then, not simply an educational venture but a political act. (1)

You also cite Berlin's argument in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* that a curriculum "is a device for encouraging the production of a certain kind of graduate, in effect, a certain kind of person. In directing what courses will be taken in what order, the curriculum undertakes the creation of consciousness" (17; qtd. in Shor 16). I'd like you to respond to those quotes and that thinking about the creation of literacy and social consciousness.

IS: I'd reiterate that first-year college writing and language arts generally serve consequential functions in society. English happens to be the only course that every student takes every year. *The supervision of language practices is apparently very important in the socialization of the young. This also requires the socialization of English teachers who are carefully managed as the largest disciplinary staff in the teacher corps.*

One way to maintain control over socialization through language arts is to keep the English teacher's nose to the status quo. The dominant framework for our professional practice is to teach correct usage and great literature, the standards of excellence against which we, and our students, are judged. We are authorized as keepers and distributors of an elite tradition that supports the power and privilege of those now in power. So, writing teachers experience cultural intimidation as well as cultural rewards for buying into the status quo. We represent elite culture. We derive prestige and employment from this relationship to power. We are pressured and punished when we deviate from teaching standard English and the great books.

English teachers have gained a reputation in the folkways for being the "language police" of society. We commonly notice folks becoming shy in our presence because they are afraid to make grammatical errors when they speak. This is one way to see what Paulo Freire meant by "the culture of silence" enwrapping the subordinate. Cultural silence or subordination, which is a learned interaction in the teacher/student relationship, should be a lesson to us about what power is in play when we frontload "correct" usage and the official canon. We're risking the cultural intimidation of especially non-elite students, so that they lose their sense of authority (the right to be an author). Those of us who become critical teachers, who practice an alternative rhetoric that questions the status quo, will be reinventing the discourses, usages, and canons of the classroom, the field, and the institution. Critical-democratic rhetoric asks: Where does subject matter come from and what do we do with it? How can the syllabus represent the culture, language and conditions of the students? How can formal knowledge be studied in ways that empower the students to question the status quo?

LP: Ira, I'd like to conclude the interview with a reference to Richard Ohmann's *Radical Teacher* essay, "Historical Reflections on Accountability"; then, I'd like to ask a final question. In that essay, he provocatively suggests that "high stakes testing schemes will make for more surgical channeling into the job market and the class system – and under the banner of accountability, needless to say. The official ideology of public education is now that of the market" (7). Increasingly, market logic seems to dominate not only the official discourse of education, but also the motives of students who understandably crave the credentials they think will get them the jobs that will propel into the good life. As you know, more people attend college today in the U.S. than ever before (something on the order of 15 million students), but most national economic indicators reveal that structural inequality is worse than ever. The income/wealth gap between the richest and most powerful percentiles of the population and the rest of us is greater than it has been in U.S. history. How do you see the future of U.S. higher education? With management discourses and market logic on the upswing, how do we get away from the trend to commodify everything about

education?

IS: This recent era has often been labeled 'neo-liberalism' which means that an aggressive market system dominates policy at all levels, including the regimes of discourse in school and society. So, it's no surprise that the discourses of authority in education circulate around themes of cost-effectiveness, budget-cutting, privatization, accountability, vouchers, testing, and job-market issues. It's been about fifty years since education in our society has been subjected to such a severe market discipline as we are seeing now. Of course, the business agenda has been a dominant feature of public schools and colleges for over a century, but a truly aggressive market discipline was last administered to public education following the great strike waves of 1946, according to a brilliant history of that era by Elizabeth Fones-Wolf. Education and the public sector in general have recently become targets for privatization schemes which represent the latest efforts to extend market control and management control for the transfer of resources from tax levies and public needs to private and religious interests. I called this recent campaign, "the conservative restoration" in my book *Culture Wars*, which studies how the status quo struck back to recover control after the mass movements of the 1960s compelled greater expenditures on social needs.

College teachers and students as well as curricula and campuses are inside the market system, not outside it, not Ivory Towers protected from the international flow of capital or the political imperatives of ruling groups recovering from the mass movements and labor gains of the 1960s. The world economy is being rationalized into a One-World System, a One-World Market, which is what Globalization and the end of the Cold War are all about. Corporate globalization wants no borders interfering with its need to move capital, information, labor, goods, and services from one local market to another. The most aggressive opponents of borders are global corporations, not postmodern writers or thinkers. This means that market logic will more aggressively configure all corners of life, including curriculum and writing classes. The cheap labor and management control sought by Nike and Disney all over the world are in line with the cheap labor and management control sought by college administrations who prefer adjunct teachers to full-timers. Contingent labor is easier to control and cheaper to hire. The cheap labor of choice in the global marketplace is the young female worker just as the cheap labor of choice in the writing class is the young female adjunct. The transfer of wealth from working populations to upper classes mirrors the transfer of wealth from revenue-rich cash-cows like first-year comp to upper-division courses and administrative perks.

This is not a pretty picture of the world being constructed for us by the market system. These are toxic conditions for our work in colleges. What to do? Push for a democratic labor policy and for self-management in writing programs by teachers. Think global, act local. Connect to others who are in the same boat. Full and part-time teachers, along with our students and their families, need to stand together to get the comp programs we deserve, but we also have to stand with the cheap labor that cleans our classrooms, dorms, and offices, as well as with the cheap labor that grows our delicious bananas in Guatemala and stitches our elegant running shoes in Vietnam. The choices are only becoming more stark – solidarity or inequity, solidarity or barbarism.

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